

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Some Notes on “New Expressions,” by Jacob Ciocchi

by [Jacob Ciocci](#) on December 23, 2014



(all images courtesy the artist)

Editor's Note: We'd been hearing a lot about [New Hive](#) over the last year, so when we heard curator Lindsay Howard was working with artists to commission works for the multimedia platform we were very curious. We invited Jacob Ciocci, the latest artist commissioned by New Hive, to discuss his process and work.

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“New Expressions,” Jacob Ciocchi’s eight-page online commission for NewHive, describes a how-to guide for creating animated paintings. This collection explores the ways in which creativity has been commodified for the masses, as a result of DIY culture, arts and crafts stores, and lifestyle specialists like Martha Stewart. While he embraces a paint-by-numbers-style approach to art-making, Ciocchi remains aware of how these recipes, or the digital interfaces that integrate them, influence the creative process. “New Expressions” is viewable on

NewHive [here](#), and below is an extended artist statement. —curator Lindsay Howard

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The following are notes on my commissioned project for NewHive entitled “[New Expressions](#).”

1. Think Outside The Box

I repeat a single phrase across many pages of this project: “Think outside the box.” The box has been a recurring theme for me for over 10 years — a stupid metaphor from an old comic I made in 2001 that I use because of its flexibility and vagueness, and ability to mean different things at different times.

For this project, the phrase refers to a website’s graphical user interface. Although I’m thinking about NewHive specifically, an interface can be any system that has rules; a right and a wrong way to do things, a process that comes with a set of instructions, or a limiting force that one cannot escape. It reminds me of this Philip K. Dick quote, if you replace the word “reality” with “an interface”: “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”

NewHive is a website that became available to the public earlier this year. It allows users to create rich multimedia websites without having to know HTML or CSS. It’s a powerful tool for creating websites quickly and intuitively. After watching the site for about six months, I started thinking about how the design and interactivity on NewHive communicated certain biases and beliefs, and how that affects the kind of work that’s created on the site. (Of course, even the most open platforms have biases — and it’s these biases, along with the ideology expressed through marketing language, that I often use as raw material when working with any new tool or interface.)

For example, I’ve always been fascinated by how frequently arts and craft terms (such as paintbrushes, scissors, and erasers) are used as metaphors in various digital technologies, from MacPaint to KidPix to Photoshop. They incorporate these familiar icons and images so users adapt more quickly, and to imply that the platform is easy to learn. But the shift in context creates a set of rules that the user must acquaint themselves with whenever they use a new platform. No tool or canvas is truly blank.



(For more on the topic of defaults, I recommend looking at Guthrie Lonergan’s [blog post](#) from 2007 comparing default versus hacking technology as it relates to the first and second generations of Net Art.)

2. The Big Box

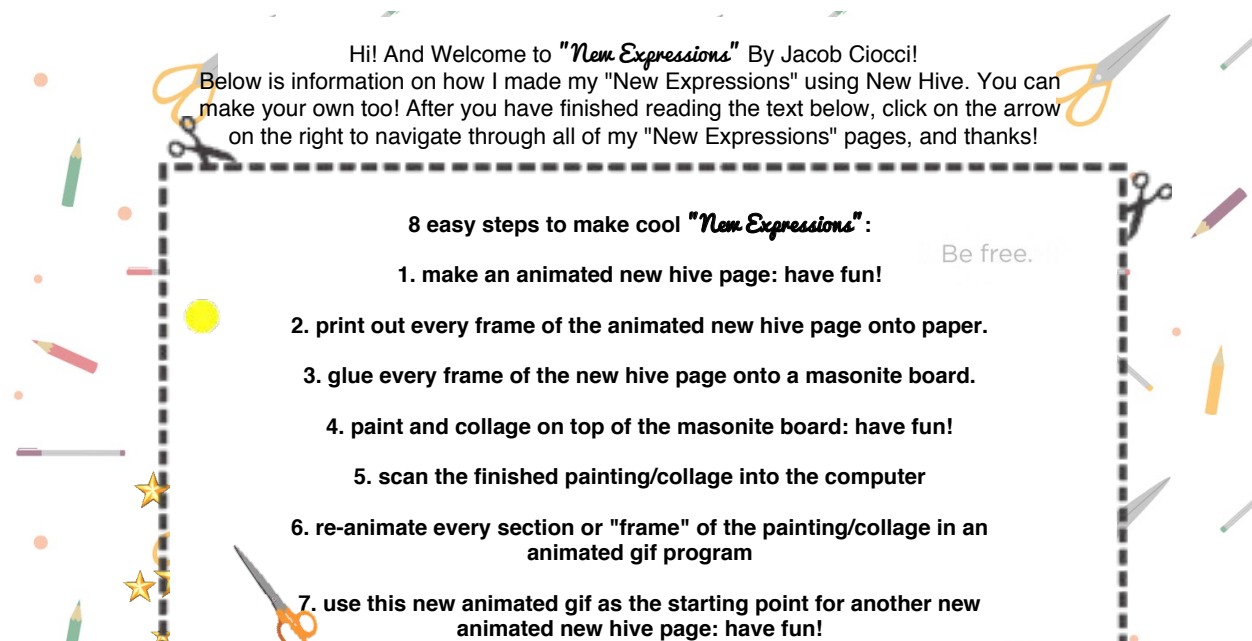
I’m also inspired by craft stores, such as Michaels and Jo-Ann Fabric and Craft Stores, which specialize in providing resources for seamstresses, scrapbookers, jewelry makers, floral designers, and others. Similar to default preferences or tutorials on the internet, craft stores specialize in providing simple how-to guides for creativity, whether it’s “paint by numbers,” recipes by Martha Stewart, or even branding on a tube of paint — there are biases written into every piece of material. These biases are complex, and partially subconscious: an artist could spend a lifetime reinterpreting and examining these products. While defaults are most strongly tied to digital tools, they’ve actually been used in an analogue way for a very long time ...

3. Rules Set You Free

Getting back to the idea of the box ...

“New Expressions” (and many of my other rules-based animated paintings) are about exploring

biases, defaults, and conventions by setting up my own set of instructions, with the idea that rules can set you free. Similarly to how Puffy Dimensional Fabric Paint or Adobe Illustrator comes with a how-to guide, I create my own arbitrary systems for creating artworks. For this project, that process is outlined below:



The secret behind any kind of creative culture, whether digital or analogue, is the idea that success comes as a result of working within the rules of the interface. I see a connection here to strategies employed by many radical, avant-garde, or experimental artists, such as Sol Lewitt. It could be argued that there's an essential difference between following someone else's instructions (Martha Stewart) versus creating your own (John Cage), but the truth is that, because everyone's inspired by their peers, surroundings, and any other limitations as we create, no creative system is ever truly original or unique.

It seems as if creative people are attempting to create a space where they feel free, by following rules (or multiple sets of interconnected rules simultaneously) such as the rules of minimalism, social practice, hacking, or noise music. The act of refusing rules is itself a kind of rule. I see this last part, the rule of breaking rules or seeking out the unknown or being a creative pioneer, as being the most conventional rule of all — and relating directly to the entrepreneurial spirit of American capitalism (see, for example, the pervasive use of the term 'disrupt' by technology companies).

4. New Expressions

The word "expressions" comes from an earlier version of NewHive, which they used to describe web pages that had been created using their toolkit. I think of this term as relating to the Jo-Ann and Michaels mentality described above, which is echoed in phrases like "experience the creativity" (a prompt used in a previous marketing campaign). NewHive, Tumblr, Pinterest, and MySpace could be interpreted as 21st century crafting cultures — even their branding is sometimes aligned with craft culture in various ways, through font, color scheme, and language choices. It's impossible to create an entirely neutral creative interface, and I'm personally most drawn to sites where users, simply by using the interface, make the rules or conventions of the interface visible.

5. Stuff Floating On Top of Other Stuff

The aesthetic of objects or shapes floating in space or on top of one another is another thread that runs through [my visual work](#). This approach has to do with the tools that are available through digital imaging interfaces: a seemingly infinite number of possible layers, drop shadows, and geometric shapes. I’ve always wondered where this particular set of visual conventions started — it is so weird if you stop and think about it. What are the historical references for layering and stacking, or even for the “polygon” tool? Again, a person could spend their whole life unraveling this story ...

Floating shapes might harken back to early 3D imaging where cubes and spheres floated because the software was not able to understand gravity yet, and the shapes were simple because more complex shapes looked awkward in comparison. I imagine that the programmers were referencing 20th century Surrealist painting:



My earliest experiences with these kinds of shapes took place inside of the Trapper Keeper notebooks where I would store my handmade doodles. Trapper Keeper notebooks, similar to NewHive (or MySpace, or Tumblr, or the Mac Interface), were a place to store creations, but were also a branded space built to reinforce or encourage a sense of wonder or infinite creative freedom. Perhaps influenced by [Abstract Illusionist](#) painting from that period, or a trickling down of [Memphis Design](#) aesthetics, the hardcovers of Trapper Keeper notebooks often featured floating shapes, drop shadows, squiggles, intricate repeating patterns (see: Nathalie Du Pasquier) and a sense of constant motion or accelerating speed: all tropes that soon dominated the visual language of the doodles I created on the inside pages of these books.



6. Making Media Easy

The repeating audio loop in this project comes from this [YouTube video](#) entitled “Splatter Painting My Converse” uploaded by Allie Brault. I appreciate this video because it was probably made using iMovie — one of the most iconic media-making tools of our lifetime. For me, making media easy is actually about making media obvious, which is an important component of any creative culture. It’s important to remember that we’re not inventing newer and better ways of doing things, but are instead reconfiguring old ways. An illusion of newness and progress is one of the most pervasive, and ultimately destructive, agendas imaginable.

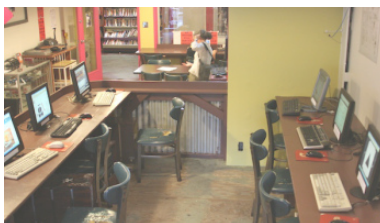
A telescope does not discover a new continent, a spaceship does not travel to a new planet, a microscope does not discover a new atom, and Facebook is not a new way of connecting. All of these tools take what constitute “reality” and spin it faster and faster inside the centrifuge of human culture and experience, until all of the pieces that make up “reality” are ground up into tinier and tinnier particles, which have the illusion of seeming “new” based on their re-organized attributes. Content is not created — it’s re-configured. Experiences are not new — they’re distortions of themselves. That’s why I love the name NewHive. If there’s one thing that the hive mind of the internet has taught me, it’s that nothing is new.

7. One Final Note

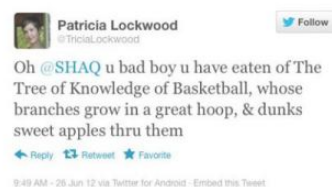
I believe that even the most cutting-edge post-MFA artist out there is “painting by numbers” or “dragging and dropping” their way through a creative system. They follow the rules of their own parameters. It might not be splattering puffy paint or turning on and off Photoshop filters, but navigating complex social relations. They are rules all the same. To put it plainly, every artist’s approach is conventional, which is something I’m starting to see become more clear as the art world gets eaten by popular culture. Of course, this description of the post-MFA artist includes me. I’m not exempt from these systems, in fact: I LOVE THE SYSTEM — I LOVE THINKING INSIDE BOX!!!



Tonight: Artists Take Over Williamsburg Internet Cafe



Five Problems With Showing Internet Art



10 Pivotal Moments for Digital Art in 2012